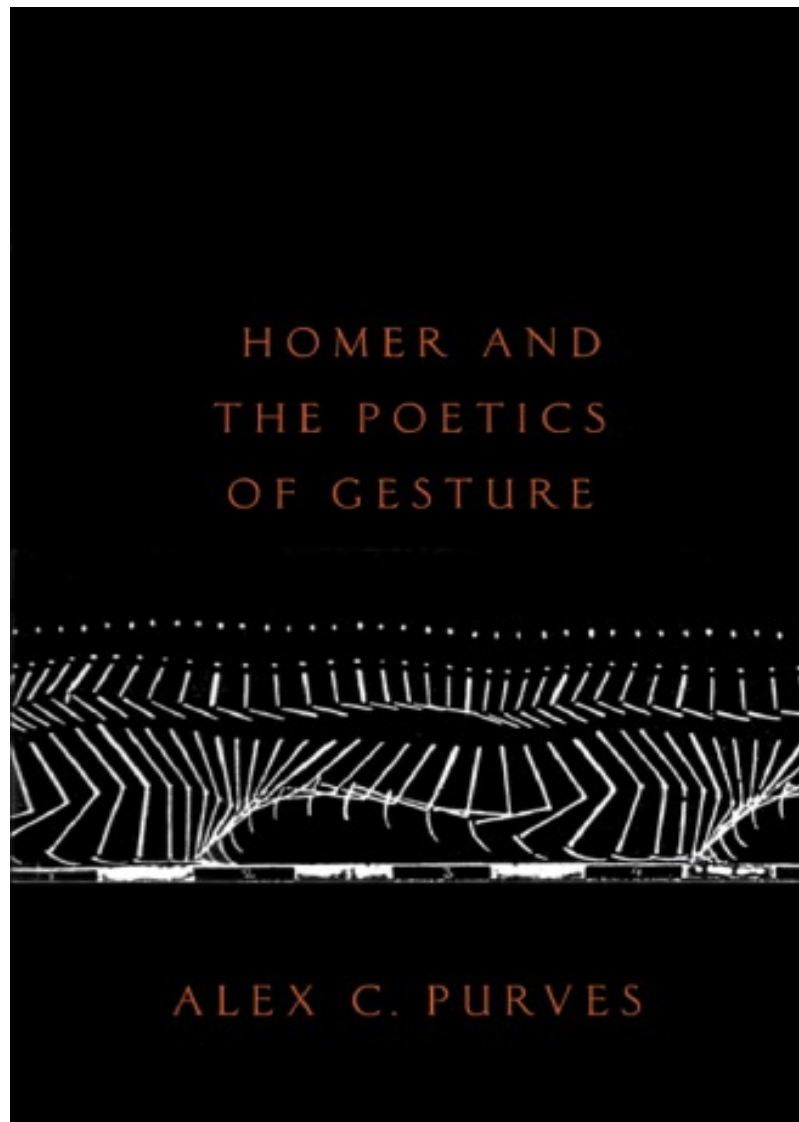


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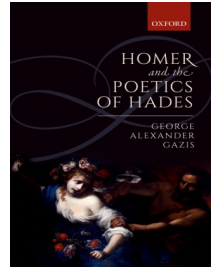


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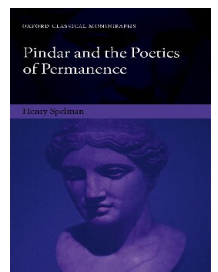
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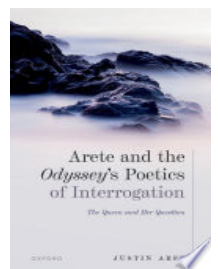
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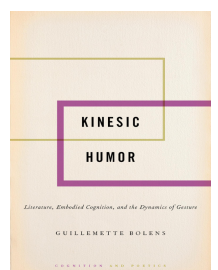
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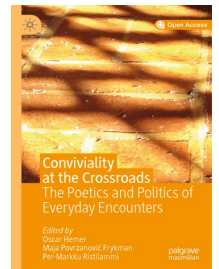
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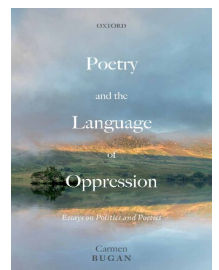
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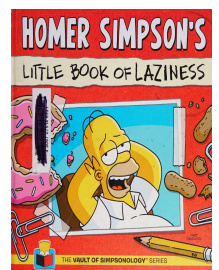
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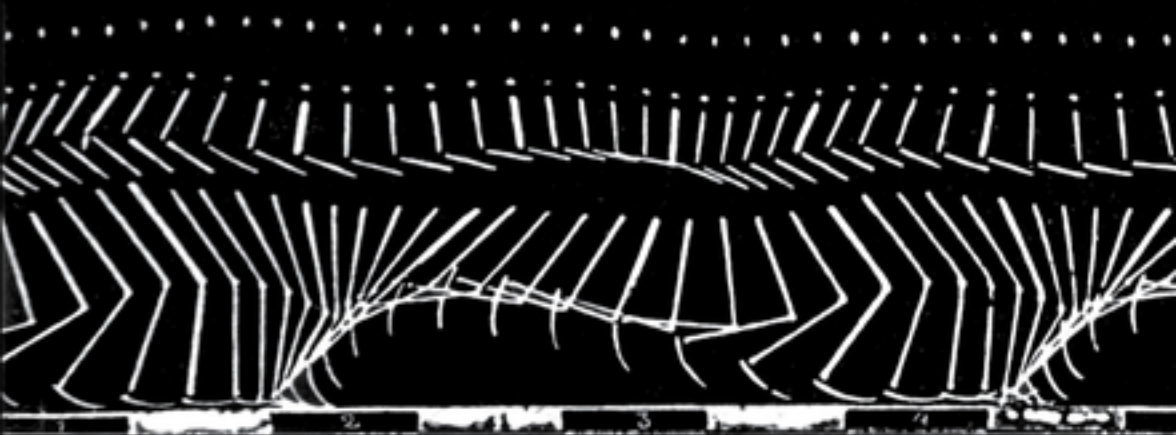


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HOMER AND
THE POETICS
OF GESTURE



ALEX C. PURVES

Homer and the Poetics of Gesture

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Alex C. Purves

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For Lionel

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List of Abbreviations

- DELG* P. Chantraine. 1968–1980. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots*. Paris: Klincksieck. 2nd ed. with Supplement, 1999.
- Denniston J. D. Denniston. 1966. *The Greek Particles*. 2nd ed. Revised by K. J. Dover. Indianapolis, CA: Hackett.
- Dindorf W. Dindorf. (1855) 1962. *Scholia graeca in Homeri Odysseam*. 2 vols. Amsterdam: Hakkert.
- Erbse H. Erbse. 1969. *Scholia graeca in Homeri Iliadem*. 5 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- GH* P. Chantraine. 1958–1963. *Grammaire homérique*. 3rd ed. 2 vols. Paris: Klincksieck.
- LfgrE* B. Snell et al., eds. 1955–2010. *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*. Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- LIMC* *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (1981–99). Zürich, München, and Düsseldorf: Artemis and Winkler Verlag.
- LSJ* *Greek-English Lexicon*. 1925–1940. 9th ed. Compiled by H. G. Lidell and R. Scott, rev. H. S. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon. Rev. Supplement by P. G. W. Glare, 1996.

Introduction

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, “An Ancient Gesture”

IN EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY’S “AN ANCIENT GESTURE” (1954), WE ARE invited to contemplate how the gesture of wiping away tears with the corner of a piece of clothing is shared between the bodies of Penelope, Odysseus, and the poet. The poem’s speaker is reminded of the *Odyssey* after performing a gesture she imagines for Penelope when she, exhausted from long nights unweaving her shroud, wept in longing for her husband. Although this exact gesture is more Millay’s than Homer’s, her poem registers a way of reading and remembering the epic through an association between her own body and Penelope’s. Her protagonist’s simple act, cast here as domestic and ordinary (perhaps it is performed in the kitchen by a woman cutting onions), acquires, through correlation to Homer, a certain resonance.¹ As she will go on to write, “This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique, / In the very best tradition, classic, Greek.” By overlaying her [own] gestures onto those of a fictional character, Millay also suggests some form of a shared experience; a common understanding or empathy that can momentarily occur through the reenactment of a bodily phrase.

But if gestures can be “authentic” they can also be copied and made false. For the poet proposes, in the second and final stanza, that Odysseus stole the eye-wiping motif from his wife and turned it into a rhetorical device. In Odysseus’ hands, it is now performed “only as a gesture,” in contrast to “Penelope, who really cried:”

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope ...
Penelope, who really cried.

1. On Millay’s adoption of various markedly feminine personae in her poetry, including that of the wife, see Gilbert 1993; Cucinella 2010: 27–53.

2 *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture*

All at once, therefore, the gesture—although it had seemed at first to retain its meaning as it traveled from person to person—is revealed to share only a formal resemblance between the three. It may involve the same mechanics in each case, but the context and emotional impact differ widely as it cycles through Homer's various characters and readers (even the connection between the poet and Penelope is frayed at the end, as we are left wondering what kind of tears Millay means her speaker-self to have wiped away). Finally, too, the gesture's initially intrinsic status, as something that was once original to the body of Penelope, is belied by the poem's marked use of repetition, not only in the formal structure of its rhyming and mirroring within and between the stanzas,² but also in its relaying of the gesture from subject to subject ("Penelope did this too;" "Ulysses did this too"). And since Penelope, as we are told, did it "more than once" it becomes clear that the gesture only really *becomes* a gesture through reperformance, whether by others or oneself.³

For Millay, then, the simple act of drawing a corner of material up to the face becomes a vehicle not only for engaging with Homeric epic in a personal way but also for thinking through the implications of a genre in which the same gesture can be both deeply meaningful in one case and learned or formulaic in another. The gesture is stored in the body as a kind of muscle memory, one that Millay herself can tap into as a resource for recalling Penelope, but that can also be re-enacted by other characters within the Homeric corpus, leading to an alignment between bodies that is at times unexpected.⁴

Although my reading of Homer is less personal than Millay's, in this book I too use specific bodily positions or actions as starting points for interpreting the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Each chapter begins from a movement phrase (falling, running, leaping, standing, or reaching) and then traces the iteration of that phrase through one or both of the poems. By reading a single or limited number of postures per chapter, I track the sequences and modulations into which a gesture can fall. At times, I follow a thread similar to the one from Millay I have just outlined, such as when I chart the emotional complexities of

2. In addition to the rhyming patterns within the poem (too/do/too; night/tight/light; years/tears; antique/Greek/speak; implied/cried), Millay frequently uses "and" at line-beginning to create a mirroring effect, especially with the opening line of each stanza (e.g., "I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:" [1]; "And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:" [10]), although this symmetrical effect is on occasion deliberately broken (e.g., the second stanza has one fewer line than the first).

3. On the reperformance of gesture, especially gendered gesture, see Butler 1988 (and further in this Introduction).

4. Penelope's and Odysseus' contrasting use of gesture in Millay looks toward the long-standing debate over whether gesturing is a "natural" or "artificial" practice, as I discuss later in this Introduction.

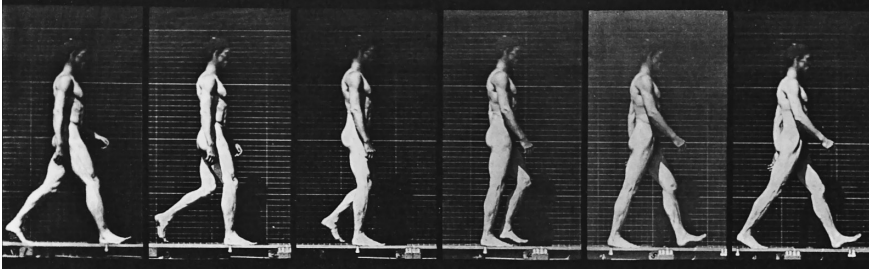


Figure 1.1. Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion*. vol. 1, plate 2, *Walking* (excerpt), 1887. Source: Boston Public Library. Wikimedia Commons.

reaching one's arms out toward another person. But many of the gestures I consider also focus on the whole body, in sequences somewhat akin to Eadweard Muybridge's famous capturing of movement phrases in a series of stills, as in Figure 1.1.

Like Muybridge, I have been drawn to forms of pedestrian activity whose intricacies are only fully revealed when they are isolated or reframed.⁵ Indeed, many of these types of activity occur so many times in Homer that they rarely stand out as marked sites for interpretation and analysis. We might instead describe them as providing a background rhythm to the poems, a kinetic structure that is intricately tied to Homer's engineering of temporality and plot while they in themselves pass largely unnoticed. Action of this kind often blends so imperceptibly with formulaic language ("he came up to him at a run"; "he jumped down with his armor from his chariot to the ground"; "she stood beside the pillar")⁶ that their familiarity may condition us to paying barely any attention to them at all. My aim is to challenge that notion by isolating gestures and attempting to capture their kinaesthetic effects within the poems as a whole.

Gesture, though, is a difficult term and one that I want to be careful to categorize both broadly and flexibly. Following the work of scholars such as Vilém Flusser and Carrie Noland, I mean by it whole-body movement phrases rather

5. Many other examples that defamiliarize walking in particular could also be adduced. See, for example, the Judson Church dance collective's experiments with walking and other pedestrian movements (e.g., Trisha Brown's 1971 piece "Walking on the Wall") and my Chapter 5. Agamben's classic essay "Notes on Gesture" begins with Tourette's 19th-century medical research into the human walk (Agamben [1992] 2000, and further in this chapter).

6. ἀντίος ἦλθε θέων, three times, *Il.*; ἐξ ὀχέων σὺν τεύχεσιν ἄλτο χαμάζε, eight times, *Il.*; στή ῥα παρὰ σταθμόν, five times, *Od.* All translations are my own unless otherwise noted; all citations of Homer are taken from the Oxford Classical Text, vols. 1 and 2 (3rd ed., 1920) edited by David B. Munro and T. W. Allen, vols. 3 (2nd ed., 1917) and 4 (2nd ed., 1919) edited by T. W. Allen. On verb-subject formulas, see Parry [1928] 1971: 43; on minimal statements of the kind "strike with the spear" or "his limbs collapsed," which admit extensive variation, see Hainsworth 1993: 12–13.

than, specifically, facial or hand movements used in the service of communication.⁷ In some contexts, a more suitable term would be *schēma*, which is used in Classical Greek to refer to the gestures or form of the human body, as well as—in rhetoric—to a figure of speech.⁸ This meaning is complementary to my own use of “gesture” and helps to expand the term into a figurative and thematic, rather than purely literal, sense.

In Figure 1.2, a “chronophotograph” produced by Muybridge’s contemporary, the physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey, we see a man who, in the process of walking, represents an abstract pattern of movement. The effect is produced by Marey’s choice of where on his subject’s body to place lighted strips, and by the systematic multiple exposure of the same figure on a single plate.⁹ Whereas Muybridge’s experiments create a freeze-frame effect, capturing a sequence of individual moments within separate grids of time and space, Marey’s photographs result in a fluid running together of the various gradients of a gesture through time. It is worth noting, though, how both images bring to prominence certain parts of the body: the face and hands (our prime denominators of individuality) have disappeared, and instead the limbs alone reveal the contours of human movement.¹⁰

7. Flusser [1991] 2014: 1 (“gestures are to be considered movements of the body and, in a broader sense, movements of tools attached to the body”). See also Thomas 1991; Agamben [1992] 2000; Corbeill 2004; Noland 2008 and 2009: 1–17; Väliaho 2010; Olsen 2016 and forthcoming. For gesture limited to communication and thus akin to speech (nonverbal communication), see Kendon 1981 and 2004. Kendon’s reading, which is concerned with semiotics, better relates to Lateiner’s work on the Homeric body than mine. See Lateiner 1992 and 1995 and de Jong 2012 for analysis of gesture as a social and communicative practice in Greek epic. For gesture in other classical genres as well, see Boegehold 1999; the essays collected in Clark et al. 2015; O’Connell 2017: 53–79.

8. See further Schmitt 1990: 34–35 on *gestus*, *motus*, *kinēsis*, *habitus*, and *schema*. Greek σχῆμα and Latin *schema* are used by ancient critics to denote gesture in drama and rhetoric (see also n.28, this Introduction). Quintilian, *De oratore* 9.1.10–11, says the following of the term *figura* (“figure”): *Nam duobus modis dicitur: uno qualiscumque forma sententiae, sicut in corporibus, quibus, quoquo modo sunt composita, utique habitus et aliquis; altero, quo proprie schema dicitur, in sensu vel sermone aliqua a vulgari et simplici specie cum ratione mutatio* (“the word is used in two senses. In one, it means any shape in which a thought is expressed—just as our bodies, in whatever pose they are placed, are inevitably in some sort of attitude. In the second sense, which is the proper meaning of *schēma*, it means a purposeful deviation in sense or language from the ordinary simple form,” trans. D. A. Russell).

9. On Marey’s photographic method, see Braun 1992: 42–149. In cases such as Figure 1.2, the human figure is dressed all in black, so as to effectively disappear behind the illuminated strips on his limbs.

10. On the body “disappearing” in Marey’s choronophotography, see Michaud 1998: 86, as discussed in Didi-Huberman 2002: 119–20. As the latter puts it, “[i]l faudra donc que les ‘points caractéristiques’—par nature séparés, discrets, discontinus—parviennent à épouser le *continuum* temporel du mouvement” (emphasis original, 2002: 122), and discussed further in this Introduction.

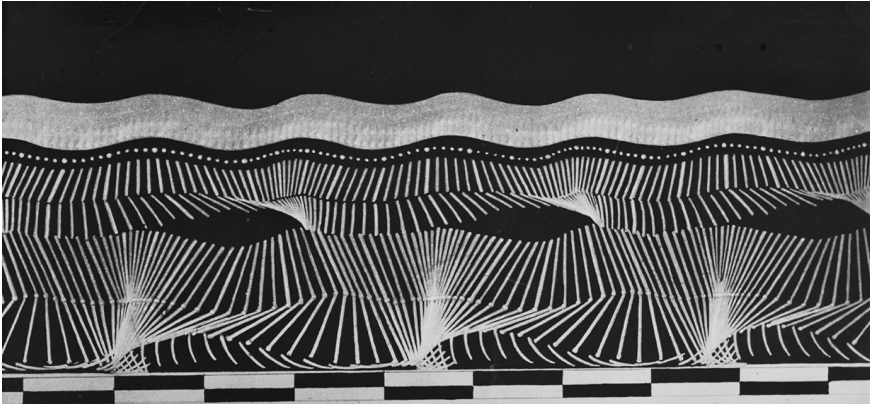


Figure 1.2. Étienne-Jules Marey, “Marche de l’Homme: Épure; Graphique obtenu au moyen de la chronophotographie géométrique partielle,” 1882–1886. Source: Collège de France. Archives.

The sweep of the image produced by Marey’s photographic experiments perhaps goes partway to explaining my own emphasis on gesture as “poetics,” as I put it in this book’s title, insofar as I want to suggest that bodies move in formal patterns in Homer and that those movements weave together complex patterns of meaning. The repeated actions and various nuances that make up these gestures have a way of gathering key elements of Homer’s narrative logic into their own sweep or arc. I do not use gesture’s various parts or units, therefore, as an attempt to think of the body as something that exists in pieces,¹¹ but rather as an attempt to explore movement’s connection to the body (and the poem) as a whole. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines gesture first as “a manner of carrying the body,”¹² and this meaning is important because it shows how deeply gesturing is tied to one’s sense of self (as is also true when gesturing is shared between bodies, I go on to argue). The gesture of falling, for example, takes the whole body down with it, and in a certain way this action is what all gestures do: they remind us that we have a body, and that they are the devices, the vehicles, which “carry” or “bear” (*gerere*) it.¹³

11. On “the body in parts,” see the collection by Hillman and Mazio (1997). Snell 1953 famously described the Homeric body as “a mere construct of independent parts variously put together” (6). I discuss the relevance of Snell’s ideas of the Homeric body as an aggregate of parts (1953: 5–8) to my own arguments later in this Introduction.

12. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. *noun*, 1a.

13. Agamben [1992] 2000: 57, quoting Varro *On the Latin Language* 6.8.77 and following the derivation of gesture from *gerere*. See also Agamben [1991] 1999b and [2005] 2007 and my Chapter 6.

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